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Ethnographic Information on a Wild Man of the Caucasus

While conducting research on the languages of the Northwest Caucasus, the author encountered a set of words which denote a manlike creature, native to that area of the Soviet Union, which is described as a hairy "half man and half beast" that lives in thick forests on mountainsides. This creature plays little part in local folklore; conversely it is considered a mundane beast which occasionally raids crops or waylays hunters. The author draws some parallels between the reputed linguistic, social, and ecological behaviour of the Caucasian Wild Man and that of the Sasquatch.

It is best at the very outset of this paper to make absolutely clear what will be discussed and asserted so that no confusions or misinterpretations will be permitted to form. First, there is no evidence whatsoever of a concrete nature known to the author that would allow one to infer scientifically that there was indeed some unknown species of hominid surviving in the Caucasus. This study, therefore, does not assert that such a creature exists. Second, the data examined are solely ethnographic, that is, they consist solely of facts about the beliefs in and attitudes toward a man-beast-like creature held by a particular Caucasian people, the Circassians, and indeed by a limited number of individuals from this group. In an important sense the paper is about the Circassians and their kinsmen, and only indirectly about a wild man. Third, these beliefs will be compared with those from Canada and the United States and speculation will be made as to what such a creature would be like, if in fact it were to exist. While not asserting the existence of any such creature, it would be negligent not to subject the data to some scrutiny and to assess their worth for any hypotheses that other workers might wish to construct concerning relict hominids.

The work which led to the present study involved etymologies. The languages under study were West and East Circassian, the latter also frequently covered by the rubric "Kabardian," Ubykh, Abkhaz, and Abaza. These form the Northwest Caucasian language family, originally spoken as their family name implies in the Northwest Caucasus mountain region of the U.S.S.R. There are emigré communities of these peoples, particularly Circassians,

scattered throughout the Middle East and in a few cities in Europe and the U.S. My chief informant was Adnan Saygili, a young Abadzakh (West Circassian) speaker born in Turkey but living in Vienna, Austria. Further work was done with Rashid Dahabsu and Isa Tarquaho, both of the U.S., and by mail with several Abkhazian informants in the U.S.S.R. through the kind help of B. G. Hewitt of Cambridge, England. I had been working with Saygili on Circassian folklore, in particular fables, and had elicited several striking tales involving a cyclopean giant (see the appended table for this and other Northwest Caucasian terms). I had known of an Ubykh word usually glossed as "a fabulous being who lives in the forests." This word contained what appeared to be an Ubykh form for "montane forest." The words for "valley," "gorge," and "mountain slope" present etymological difficulties within this language family. I sought, therefore, to gain some etymological insights while furthering my inquiry into fables by asking Saygili if he knew the Abadzakh word for such a forest creature. Luckily he did. Not only did I acquire a satisfying etymology, but I unexpectedly came upon a surprising folk belief.

THE CONTENT OF THE BELIEF IN THE WILD MAN

Saygili asserted that he had been taken on a hunting trip to the mountains of eastern Turkey by his father. While there his father made efforts to familiarize him with the spoor of various animals. At one point he drew a rough impression that resembled a human footprint. He told Saygili that this was what the footprint of the "montane-forest-man" looked like and that if he ever came upon such a spoor not to try to track the creature. It was not dangerous, but might attack a lone hunter if the man were to wander into thick brush. Saygili's father further asserted that while he had never seen such spoor in Turkey, he had seen such tracks while hunting in the mountains of his native Caucasus. He believed that the creature did not live as far south as Turkey, but he felt that for the sake of thoroughness and safety he should tell his son about it nonetheless. Saygili said that the human-like footprints which his father drew were somewhat wider and "cruder" than what one would expect of a normal man's print. Unfortunately, no other details were obtainable on this matter of the prints. Nonetheless, a considerable amount of lore concerning such a wild man was obtained.

Saygili asserted that such a creature was commonly known by those Circassians who hunted frequently. It was said to be short, approximately five feet tall, to be covered with a brownish hair, to have an ugly, protruding face, to be very agile and strong, and to walk perfectly upright like a man. The face

was also thought to be hairy, but some doubt was expressed over this. It was said to inhabit the thick forests on mountain slopes and in valleys, but would occasionally come down to villages where it would raid crops such as corn. It was thought to be smart or cunning, but nevertheless to be "half man and half animal." It should be noted here that while Saygili was training to be a civil engineer he seemed to have no knowledge whatsoever of modern paleontology or anthropology.

The most surprising aspect of this folk belief is the assertion, again by Saygili, that there were Circassian men in the various communities in Turkey who had gained great esteem for having gone into the mountains and traded with this wild man when they were still young men back in the Caucasus. It seems that at least two men were supposed to have gone as a team to a clearing on a forested mountain slope. This area was known to be one of several haunts of the wild man. The men would camp for some time with their trading goods on the ground in the clearing. After a day or two one of the wild men would appear at the edge of the clearing, concealing one side of his body behind a tree trunk while exposing the other. This was thought to be the head wild man, and the gesture involved was taken to be one of a desire to make contact. The men would open up their packages of goods and spread them on the ground. The wild man would then come forward with something, and some simple bartering would take place. Despite several efforts, I was unfortunately unable to ascertain what the items involved on either side might have been except that the human items were "trinkets" and the wild man's contributions were "vegetables and things." Nothing of any great economic importance, at least to the Circassians, was supposed to have been involved. The wild man was supposed to have engaged in active dickering, making extensive use of gesture and trying very inadequately to use a crude, broken Circassian. The dangerous part of this expedition was supposed to occur when the trading was finished and the men made their way back through the forest. The wild man trader was always presumed to be the head of a small band, the other members of which remained concealed in the underbrush while they watched the trading. The band would then stalk the men through the brush and would often attempt to waylay them in order to get any remaining trinkets or artifacts as well as to take back whatever items they had originally given to the men. The bravery displayed by the men in risking this kind of ambush was the basis for the esteem which such trading expeditions conferred upon the participants. It seems that hunters were also supposed to be subject to the danger of wild man attacks for the sake of their artifacts. It was thought that a wild man could kill a man in such an attack, but that the wild man was not a carnivore or a particularly fierce or savage creature. On the contrary, the wild man was held to be quite meek and furtive but inordinately fond of shiny artifacts and willing to use his cunning and

strength to get them. For this reason, efforts were made to avoid him, and he was considered dangerous.

CIRCASSIAN ATTITUDES TOWARD THE WILD MAN

The most striking aspect of Saygili's story was his obviously indifferent attitude toward what he was telling me. Indeed, he seemed to view the supposed creature as a rather mundane beast. There seemed to be nothing special about the wild man except that he was a nuisance to farmers and a mild danger to hunters. He seemed to be too rare to be of any importance. When I tried to suggest that this wild man was comparable to the giant in the fables that Saygili had previously been relating to me, he became offended. He accused me of thinking him stupid and not able to tell a fairy tale from a real animal. He did not find the wild man interesting and was anxious to resume our work on folklore, a subject of ethnic pride that much more engaged his interest.

My two Bzhedukh (West Circassian) informants, Rashid Dahabsu and Isa Tarquaho, knew nothing of this wild man. In answer to my queries, Dahabsu sent me a clipping about the Himalayan yeti! Lore about such a creature is apparently more widespread among the Abkhaz and Abaza. Some of the Abkhaz had heard of it, but none had seen it, although people were known who might have seen it. For Ubykh, nearly extinct, the term was recorded by J. von Mészáros[1] but no ethnographic data was preserved. It would seem that terms for such a creature are widespread throughout the language family. West Circassian, Abkhaz, Abaza, and Ubykh each have one term. East Circassian has two. The universal term means either "mountain-man" or "montane-forest-man." A term unique to East Circassian means "mountain-den-mother" (see appendix).

The lore associated with such terms, however, appears to be restricted to those individuals who hunt or who lead a more bucolic existence. Unfortunately, most of my informants, apart from Saygili and his father, were from urban backgrounds. Their attitude to such wild man lore was comparable to ours: scepticism and some disbelief. This taken together with Saygili's and his father's attitude is interesting, because there appear to be no fairy tales or fables that contain this wild man as a character. It is not part of the general lore of these peoples but seems to be narrowly confined to particular economic sub-groups. Within the Northwest Caucasian's world the wild man is not a bogey man or a monster, but rather a mundane part of the Caucasian fauna. There is nothing fabulous about it in the eyes of those who believe it to exist. It is simply a nuisance.

ASSESSMENT OF THE WILD MAN LORE AND COMPARISON WITH THAT OF THE SASQUATCH AND BIGFOOT

Clearly the Caucasian wild man is supposed to be much smaller than our native Sasquatch or Bigfoot, again not asserting that the latter exists. Nevertheless, some similarities appear. The overall appearance of the Caucasian wild man and the Sasquatch are held to be similar.[2] Both are supposed to be "half man and half animal"; both are supposed to be covered with hair or fur that is in the main brownish; both are supposed to be quite ugly and to have prognathous faces; the footprints of both are supposedly wide and generally humanoid in outline. The posture of both involves an upright gait, a very human aspect. The wild man is known for his cunning, whereas reports of the Sasquatch rarely refer to any intellectual ability on the creature's part, though a few speak of it as showing some intelligence. The chief difference between the two creatures is size. The wild man is never supposed to exceed five feet whereas the Sasquatch is reported as ranging from six to ten feet and occasionally much taller. If there were such things, one would have to assume that they were entirely distinct races of early hominid, if not in fact different species or genuses.

The habitat of both creatures is supposed to be similar; thick forest appears to be a common element. It should be noted that whereas Sasquatch sightings do come from wooded areas that are not mountainous, the majority of reports come from the Pacific Northwest, a region of extensive montane forests. Such habitats present problems to any animal living in them in that they are low in nutrients.

If the Caucasian wild man and the Sasquatch were to be considered real, they would be most likely primitive hominids, considering their upright gait. Since all men and the gorilla and the chimpanzee among the higher apes are gregarious it would be surprising if a primitive hominid were to be truly solitary. Therefore, it would be most likely that relict hominids would be gregarious. Such a social structure would cause feeding problems in a montane forest environment. To solve these, any such creature would have to scatter widely to forage either singly or in pairs for long periods of time, coming together periodically for brief times in pre-selected territories. Such a picture would accord well with the notion that the wild man has haunts near certain woodland clearings. I know of no comparable assertions for the Sasquatch apart from the fact that some regions show a high incidence of sightings whereas others show very few. The significance of this, however, is unclear. It should be noted that the strategy of foraging in widely scattered small bands or as individuals is known to be used by various peoples in nutrient poor environments, such as some groups of Australian aborigines

and most of the Shoshonean peoples of the American Great Basin.

Any hypothesis that held relict hominids to be gregarious must further lead to the hypothesis that such hominids would also have means of interspecies communication; that is, certain vocalizations, gestures, movements, and so on would be intended to convey information. There is one aspect of the behaviour of the Caucasian wild man that is striking: his peering from behind a tree as a gesture intended to initiate contact. Many Sasquatch reports mention a comparable behaviour.[3] People reporting such sightings seem frequently to infer that such behaviour is furtive. If the wild man is used for comparison, quite the contrary may be inferred. Such behavior might be construed as an effort to make contact. It would seem that to date the Sasquatch has been rebuffed in his efforts, perhaps unintentionally.

One might also expect relict hominids to have some primitive form of language. Some recent work on Neanderthal speech has emphasized the limited articulatory abilities of pre-modern man.[4] The crude attempts to speak in Circassian, reported for the Caucasian wild man, might not allow one to infer a great deal since Circassian and its sister tongues are extraordinarily complex, Bzhedukh (West Circassian) having sixty-eight consonants and Ubykh having perhaps eighty-one. Thus, it would not be surprising if such a wild man were to fail in his attempts to speak any such language. It should be noted, nonetheless, that Circassian and its sister languages exhibit an abundance of "guttural" sounds—palatals, velars, uvulars, pharyngeals, and laryngeals—all sounds made in the back of the mouth. It is just these sounds that are presumed to mark a linguistic innovation with modern man. Any relict hominid would find such sounds difficult if not impossible. The accounts of the linguistic shortcomings of the wild man are therefore consistent with modern theories of early hominid speech. As to the Sasquatch, I know of no solid information concerning any speech habits apart from the occasional report that mentions grunts or cries. Nonetheless, any investigator should be aware of the possibility that a creature such as a Sasquatch might have some rudimentary form of speech or "pre-language."

There is at least one folktale in Ubykh which contains a wild man.[5] The story is about a hunter who goes to a forest on a mountain slope and there kills a deer. While roasting the meat he hears a loud cry. Taking his food with him he climbs into a tree for safety, but leaves his shaggy wool cloak draped over a bush near the fire. To his astonishment and fright a wild man appears, covered all over with hair. The wild man looks about and seeing the cloak mistakes it for a man, whereupon he pounces on it. The hunter is frightened, takes aim with his pistol and fires at the wild man. The wild man's hair catches fire (apparently from the campfire) and he beats a retreat into the forest. The story then shifts. The hunter wanders into a beautiful plain where he encounters a giant bound to a stone. The giant asks

him to bring him a hook made from the wood of the plant which blooms before all others, but bears fruit after all others. After one unsuccessful attempt he starts to cut a dogwood. He hears a voice that tells him not to touch the tree. He returns to the giant to tell him that he has been unable to find the plant. The giant is angered and curses at him. There is a sudden shift, and the giant asks him is there not abundance in the world, many sheep, lambs, and bees. The hero is non-commital, but demands to know why the giant wants such a hook. The giant replies that with such a hook he will be able to dig his sword out of the earth and go about doing what he intends to do. The hero refuses to help any further, knowing that if the giant were to retrieve his sword it would spell the end of the world and the human race. So ends the story.

A few brief comments are in order. There are two tales here, both fantastical, but of a clearly different quality. The only thing that is fantastic about the encounter with the wild man is the wild man himself. The second story involves a Prometheus-like figure, as Dumézil's and Namitok's title for the tale suggests. Themes of abundance, fertility, and doomsday are centered around this figure in a peculiar and largely unclear way. Unlike the Greek Prometheus, who brings fire and hence power to man, this giant is a destroyer of man and his world, a sort of anti-Prometheus. Therefore, there is little of the mundane and factual that characterizes the second story. It is very much a faery tale, whereas the first story has very much the air of an anecdote. There seems to be little association made between the wild man and the giant. The hero of the tale actually has a name, something which is not the case in many of the faery tales from this tradition. This suggests the possibility that the story may recount the adventures of an actual person and has become the vehicle for the tale of the anti-Prometheus. This would account for the poor integration of the two episodes. This implies, of course, that in the story teller's mind the tale of the encounter with the wild man and the tale of the anti-Prometheus are similar pieces (perhaps both are considered scary), and hence that the wild man and the giant may be considered similar beings or beings with like dramatic qualities. This may be a peculiarity of the narrator, Mr. Tevfik Esenç. Mr. Saygili, my Circassian informant, clearly had no connection between his notions of a wild man and of a giant.

The behaviour of the wild man is noteworthy. He pounces upon the shaggy wool cloak of the hero. The story says that the wild man mistakes the cloak for a man. Of course the wild man may have mistaken the cloak for an "ordinary" man wearing a cloak, but it is also possible that the wild man mistook the cloak for another shaggy wild man. Such conduct could be readily interpreted as territorial defense against other wild men. Going one step further, it is noteworthy that, unlike an animal, the wild man shows no fear of the fire, coming right up to it. If he takes the cloak for another wild

man, this implies that he expects to find another wild man around a fire, hence that wild men know and use fire. But such speculations as these, built upon the slightest evidence, are, I freely admit, quite unprovable and perhaps even a little wild.

The aura of fable that surrounds the Sasquatch among native peoples[6] is conspicuously absent from the Northwest Caucasian lore of the wild man. Indeed the Caucasian lore is the type that one would expect for some actual local animal. This point bears emphasizing, for this is in some ways an atypical account of a wild man or Sasquatch-like monster in that it is considered quite mundane and plausible, lacking the cultural accoutrements that often go with monsters. Nonetheless, this does not mean that the creature exists or ever existed. Even an accumulation of comparable reports would only supply us with fuel for hypotheses and perhaps inspiration for a search for such a creature. Nothing short of a living specimen or recent remains of one would provide us with anything of lasting scientific value, however plausible reportings and accounts might be. With this said I must frankly confess that I do not know what to make of the Caucasian wild man.

TABLE: NORTHWEST CAUCASIAN WORDS FOR A CAUCASIAN WILD MAN[7]

I. The following are not cognates, but are patterned along similar lines so that they mean basically the same thing:

1) Bzhedukh (West Circassian) /qʷəśḫaƛ'/ 'mountain-slope-man'
2) Kabardian (East Circassian) /q'ʷəśḫaƛ'/ 'mountain-slope-man'
3) Turkish Abadzakh (West Circassian) /qʷəšʸḫaƛ'/ 'mountain-slope-man'

from an original */qʷəśḫaƛ'/, built upon */qʷ(a)/ 'mountain valley, ravine'[8], */śḫa/ from earlier */ƛḫa/ 'mountain, montane forest, wooded side of a valley', and */ƛ'ə/ 'man'. The Proto-Circassian form */ƛḫa/ is cognate with the following form, /ɬaxá/ from Ubykh.

4) Ubykh /ɬaxatə̀t/ 'a fabulous being who lives in the forests',[9] literally 'montane-forest-man', from /ɬaxá/ 'montane forest' and /tə̀t/ 'man'.
5) Abkhaz /(a-)bnawaʕʷə̀/ i) 'shy boy', ii) 'forest-man'

This is a simple compound of /-bna/ 'forest' and /-waʕʷə̀/ 'man, being', with /a-/ the definite article, used as a noun-marker. That the Abkhaz word can

mean both 'shy boy' as well as 'wild man' is nicely illustrative of a semantic shift, especially when one recalls the supposed furtive character of the wild man. This Abkhaz term is cognate, with some minor differences, with the following Abaza term.

6) Abaza /bnaʕʷə̀/ 'forest-man' or 'forest-being'
with /bna/ 'forest' and /-ʕʷə̀/ a suffix meaning 'man', 'being', or 'agent'.

II. The following term is from Kabardian. I know of no parallel term or construction in the other languages.

7) Kabardian (East Circassian) /ɣʷabğənaana/ 'den-mountain-mamma',

from /ɣʷa/ 'burrow, den, hole',[10] /bğə/ 'height, mountain, steep bank, etc.'[11] and /naana/ 'mamma, grandmother, granny',[12] a hypochoristic kinship term, but formally 'mother's mother'. One wonders what folk beliefs may have been or may still be associated with term (7).

III. The following terms denote a creature which is involved in a number of tales that closely parallel the Greek adventures of Odysseus and Polyphemus, the cyclops. There seems to be no connection whatsoever between this creature and its tales and the wild man and its lore.

8) Bzhedukh (West Circassian) /yənəź/ 'giant (with one eye)'
9) Turkish Abadzakh (West Circassian) /yənəžʸ/ 'giant (with one eye)'
10) Kabardian (East Circassian) /yənəź/ 'giant (with one eye)'

These are perhaps analyzable as /yə/ 'large', /-n-/ a connective particle found in compounds, and /-ź/ 'old, venerable'. The Circassian terms are cognate with the following Ubykh and Abaza forms.

11) Ubykh /yanə̀ż/ 'giant'
12) Abaza /aynəžʷ/ 'giant'

The Abkhaz from is unrelated to the above,

13) Abkhaz /a-dàw/ '(the) giant'.

Note: An * placed before a word denotes it as being hypothetical. The following symbols are used in addition to those in the Phonetic key: ḥ—a voiceless pharyngeal spirant, a harsh, *h*-like sound, almost as in gagging; ʕʷ—a rounded voiced pharyngeal spirant, similar to the previous sound but with a buzzing quality and a rounding of the lips; ǧ—a voiced palatal spirant, a drawn out, "gummy" version of *y*; ś—a voiceless alveo-palatal spirant, halfway between an *s* and a *sh*; ź—a voiced alveo-palatal spirant, like the preceding sound, but with a buzzing quality; ż—a voiced apico-alveolar spirant, like an English *z*, but made by bringing the tip of the tongue near the tooth ridge; in general, a superscript ʷ indicates rounding of the lips.

Notes

1. *Die Päkhy Sprache* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934).
2. For reports of sightings, see John Green, *Bigfoot* (New York: Ballantine, 1973) and *Sasquatch: The Apes Among Us* (Saanichton, B.C.: Cheam Publishing and Hancock House, 1978); D. Hunter, with Rene Dahinden, *Sasquatch* (Scarborough, Ont : New American Library of Canada, 1973), and John Napier, *Bigfoot* (New York: E.P. Dutton and Berkeley Publishing, 1972).
3. For example, B. Rensberger, "Is It Bigfoot, or Can It Be Just a Hoax?" New York *Times*, 30 June 1976, pp. 39, 70.
4. P. Lieberman, "On the Evolution of Human Language," in *A Festschrift for Morris Halle*, eds. S.R. Anderson and P. Kiparsky (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1973), 107–27.
5. Georges Dumézil and Aytek Namitok, "Recits oubykh," *Journal asiatique* 243 (1955): 1–47; see V. "Un Prométhée oubykh" on pp. 30–33.
6. See Wayne Suttles, "On the Cultural Track of the Sasquatch," *Northwest Anthropological Research Notes* 6, no. 1 (1972): 65–90, and his contribution to this volume.
7. For further reference, see X.S.Bgažba et al., *Russko-abxazskij slovar'* (Suxumi: Akademija Nauk Gruzinskoj SSR, Abxazskij Institut jazyka, literatury i istorii im D.I. Gulia, 1964); B.M. Kardanov and A.T. Bičoev, eds., *Russko-kabardinsko-čerkesskij slovar'* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe Izdatel'stvo Inostrannyx i Nacional'nyx Slovarej, 1955); and X.D. Žirov and N.B. Ékba, eds., *Russko-abazinskij slovar'* (Moscow: Čerkesskij Naučno-issledovatel'skij Institut, Gosudarstvennoe Izdatel'stvo Inostrannyx i Nacional'nyx Slovarej, 1956).
8. A.H. Kuipers, *A Dictionary of Proto-Circassian Roots* (Lisse, The Netherlands: Peter de Ridder Press, 1975), p. 71.
9. H. Vogt, *Dictionnaire de la Langue Oubykh* (Oslo: Instituttet for Sammenlignende Kulturforskning, Universitetsforlaget, 1963), p. 144, 1030.
10. Kuipers, *Dictionary*, p. 77,
11. Ibid., p. 57.
12. Ibid., p. 89.